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The Peoria Gateway Line

Until the eve of the first World War, the M&StL was called the Albert Lea Route, but thereafter it became known as the Peoria Gateway Line. The reason is obvious. More emphasis was placed on freight, and Peoria is an important gateway for east and west tonnage. Albert Lea, on the contrary, was chiefly regarded as a passenger junction point. The new slogan was indicative of the coming importance of freight.

All, however, was not well on the M&StL. The drubbing the road took under government operation during World War I was a big factor in bringing on the receivership of 1923. A long siege of crop failures, unfavorable business conditions, and finally the Great Depression prolonged the court's control. In an effort to pare expenses, all passenger trains except the *North Star Limited* were motorized. Many locals which did not earn their keep were withdrawn, and segments of branch lines abandoned. During this trying period the road was piloted by William H. Bremner, a native of Marshalltown. "Billy" Bremner started on the Iowa Central as a baggage clerk. He later was graduated from the State University at Iowa City and came to the M&StL as general attorney

in 1909. At the outbreak of America's entry into World War I he became president, then federal manager, and subsequently receiver.

When Bremner died at the end of 1934, Lucian C. Sprague was appointed a receiver and president. Mr. Sprague began his railroad career as callboy on the Burlington. Then came a spell as machinist helper, a few years firing a locomotive, and finally advancement to the right-hand side of the cab. But that was just a start. From the "Q" Lou Sprague went into engineering and supervisory positions with the Great Northern, Baltimore & Ohio, and Denver & Rio Grande Western. In 1923 he was made vice-president and general manager of the Uintah Railway, a Utah ore road.

When Mr. Sprague first arrived in Minneapolis to run the M&StL the day was stormy and bitter cold. The job before him seemed even bleaker. "The day I took the receiver's job," he recalls, "\$524,000 in unpaid vouchers for current bills were dumped on my desk with the warning, 'You'll never get another dollar's worth of material!'"

Meeting the payroll with nearly an empty till was his No. 1 job. Many expressed the opinion that the road was "of little worth as a railroad but of considerable junk value." That was Lou Sprague's cue. He could not go along with the first part of the phrase but the latter he knew to be true. A thousand obsolete freight cars rotting in

the yards gave him an idea. By long-distance telephone he contacted a friend in the wrecking business. A day or two later a certified check came for \$60,000 in part payment for the superannuated cars, sight unseen.

From that time on the M&StL started on the long road to complete rehabilitation. Just prior to the Sprague administration the Burlington had abandoned most of its Tracy-Winfield Branch; the remainder it sold to the M&StL. The Louie purchased the Martinsburg-Coppock section and another stretch between Tracy and Oskaloosa. The former segment had less curves, fewer bridges, and more moderate grades than the M&StL's route between the same points. Under Sprague's direction the ex-Burlington road was rebuilt to conform with the new main line standards on the Peoria Gateway Line. The old M&StL track going through Richland and Ollie was then dismantled.

All along the line a general face-lifting became noticeable. One-hundred-pound (to the yard) rails took the place of lighter steel on the main line, and crushed rock ballast replaced slag and cinders. The steam engine which heretofore had been the only type of locomotive on the road shared a place with the Diesel. Marshalltown and Oskaloosa saw Diesel switchers ranging from 600-, 660-, 900- to 1,000-horsepower jobs shunting cars in the yards. During the late war the re-

built Mikados (2-8-2), known as MacArthurs on the M&StL, did valiant service; but the days of the steam engine were numbered.

The advent of "road" Diesels, that is engines for service from one division point to another and beyond, meant faster and more economic freight operation. Big two-unit 3,000-horsepower Diesel-electrics cut out the water and coal stops of yesterday. Still larger three-unit 4,050-horsepower monsters meant no more doubling on hills. Indeed when Mr. Sprague came to the road the fastest freights took $32\frac{1}{2}$ hours to make the 476-mile run from Minneapolis to Peoria. Today the "three-units" barrel from terminal to terminal in 17 hours and 55 minutes. With the acceleration of time freights and a modernized plant, Iowans no longer joke about the Louie. Such nicknames as the "Midnight and Still Later," the "Maimed and Still Limping," and the "Misery and Short Life" just don't fit.

In December, 1943, the M&StL emerged from a twenty-year receivership with the same name except that "Railway" replaced "Railroad" in the title. This receivership was the longest of any Class I railroad (a road having operating revenue of over \$1,000,000 a year) still running in America. The Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway now pays substantial dividends and is one of the few railroads in the nation with no bonded indebtedness. Apart from virtually complete Diesel opera-

tion, the road is proud of the fact that better than 80 per cent of its freight cars have been acquired new since 1940.

Time was when Iowa folk used to check the reins of Old Dobbin and watch the *North Star Limited* steam by. That once-famous train symbolized the M&StL thirty years ago. Today a lad in a convertible on U. S. Highway 65 paces Time Freight 20. That fast freight between Minneapolis and Peoria, with its trim green-and-yellow Diesel, now typifies the road. The Louie is still vital to Iowa and the Midwest, and more tonnage is shipped over its rails than ever before. But the *North Star Limited* was discontinued in 1935, for the automobile had taken away most of the passenger traffic. Some local service, however, is still provided by rail motor cars pulling comfortable stainless-steel air-conditioned coaches.

Other changes are noticeable. Certain non-profitable branches have ceased to operate, namely: the Old Mud Line; branches to Montezuma and State Center; and part of the Belmond Branch from Corwith to Algona. Because of light traffic and high cost of extensive bridge maintenance, the Spencer-Storm Lake section of the Southwestern Extension was lopped off in 1936. Subsequently that part of the branch from Rembrandt south was acquired by the Milwaukee, and operation retained.

When the Tracy Branch was ripped up west of

Fosterdale on account of serious washouts, it marked the end of the second oldest steel railroad bridge in the country. This was a 400-foot through-truss span crossing the Des Moines River. Prior to its Iowa location it carried the Burlington's tracks over the waters of the Missouri at Plattsmouth, Nebraska.

To this day you will find old timers on the "Eastern Division" — that is, from Albert Lea to Peoria — who started railroading on the old Iowa Central. At the Oskaloosa station one can still discern "I C" on the cornice-stones, and some of the older depots have pot-bellied stoves with "Iowa Central Railway" on their fire doors. Long Diesel-operated fast freights roll over a modern railroad, but much of the right of way, some of the buildings, and a great deal of the tradition go back to the days of the Iowa Central. Such is the heritage of the Minneapolis & St. Louis.